

UN criticises British media for scapegoating refugees

Steve James
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Twice this year, Britain's political establishment and media have attracted criticism from the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights for their attitude towards asylum seekers.

On June 20, UNHCR High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers, a former Dutch prime minister, wrote an editorial for several international newspapers complaining of the "tone of the political debate on asylum in a number of industrialised countries—rich nations that can afford to be more generous to refugees." Lubbers complained that asylum seekers were being made an election issue in Austria, Italy, Denmark, Australia and Britain. He charged that statistics "are frequently manipulated, facts are taken out of context, and the character of asylum seekers as a group is often distorted in order to present them as a terrible threat—a threat their detractors can then pledge to crush."

On August 10 the UNHCR was moved to complain again at the scapegoating of immigrants in Britain, particularly by the national media. Referring to recent attacks on asylum seekers in Glasgow, which culminated in the murder of Kurdish immigrant Firsat Yildiz, UNHCR spokesman Kris Janowski said there was "a linkage between the notoriously negative portrayal of asylum-seekers in the media and this kind of violence... In some mass circulation newspapers, asylum-seekers are continually branded a problem, statistics are being twisted and negative stories are being endlessly highlighted. This often-deliberate attempt to tarnish the name of an entire group has been so successful that the words 'asylum-seeker' and 'refugee' have even become a term of abuse in school playgrounds."

Neither Lubbers nor Janowski identified any particular culprits, but recent months have provided numerous examples of the inflammatory role being played by the tabloid press in Britain in whipping up anti-immigrant sentiments.

The killing of Firsat Yildiz is particularly revealing in this respect. Two white men fatally stabbed Firsat on August 5, near to the impoverished Sighthill housing estate in Glasgow.

The attack came just two months after a general election campaign, in which Labour and the Conservatives competed over who had the toughest policies against asylum seekers.

In the last months, some 1,500 asylum seekers have been dumped on the isolated Sighthill estate, under the government's policy of "dispersing" new arrivals across the country. Firsat's killing followed 70 officially recorded racial attacks on asylum seekers in the Glasgow area this year, along with numerous reports that asylum seekers were too scared to venture from their homes in the estate's high rise apartment blocks.

Despite the volatile racial and social tensions in the area after the killing, Scotland's *Daily Record* tabloid launched a witch-hunt against the dead man, and any one who protested his killing. The *Record* is the sister paper of England's pro-Labour *Daily Mirror*, and is owned by the media giant Trinity Mirror, which controls 260 national and regional newspapers across the UK.

On August 7, the paper led with a banner headline "Madness—Refugees Bring Chaos to Glasgow," referring to the protest march held by asylum seekers against the racist killing, which was followed by a xenophobic counter-demonstration.

The next day, the *Record* went even further, effectively legitimising Firsat's murder on the grounds that he had lied to the immigration authorities. "Turk stabbing victim conned his way in as asylum seeker—The young Kurd killed in Glasgow was NOT a refugee who fled Turkey because of his political beliefs. He was a fruit and veg trader trying to build a better life in Britain", the *Record* alleged. It claimed that Firsat "was a conman who came to this country to make a fast buck... we should not be blinded by political correctness."

A subsequent investigation by the *Sunday Herald* revealed that he had in fact been an opponent of the Turkish government, having spent three months in jail for speaking out in support of Kurdish mothers whose children have "disappeared" during the government's ongoing war of repression against the Kurds.

According to Peri Ibrahim, who runs the Scottish Kurdish Association, Firsat's family bought his way out of jail and paid traffickers to smuggle the 22-year-old student across Europe in a succession of lorries and vans. Firsat arrived in the UK with no papers, and first lived in a temporary hostel in Kent, before being moved to Glasgow under Labour's dispersal programme. He had not given his full name to the immigration authorities to save his family from persecution. But they have subsequently become the subject of surveillance by the Turkish regime.

The *Daily Record* was not interested in the true story, only in justifying a further clamp-down on the right to asylum. On August 9, the tabloid reported a second knife attack in Sighthill, on an Iranian refugee, Davoud Rasul Naseri. However, more prominence was given to a report of another knife attack in the city, this time on a white man, Robert Young, allegedly assaulted by asylum seekers. According to the *Daily Record*, "Robert Young is convinced the men who knifed him in the head, face and chest in broad daylight were asylum seekers." No evidence was presented, other than Young's assertion that his assailants "looked East European" and that one had spoken "in a different language, but I could tell he was saying something horrible."

The *Record* then moved on to target those who defend the rights of asylum seekers. On August 9, the Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees (CWR) held a demonstration outside the *Record's* offices, protesting its racist and inflammatory coverage of the events in Sighthill. The group, which intends to proceed with a complaint against the *Record* to the Press Complaints Commission, had held a brief and stormy meeting with the newspaper's editor, Peter Cox.

In a hysterical, full page editorial August 10, "Read this Scotland and Weep", the *Record* railed against those who were protesting its coverage. "There are some political extremists who try to make capital out of any situation—no matter how sensitive it may be," the paper opined, in what was in fact a more accurate description of the tabloid's own activities.

Having vented its spleen against "rabble-rousing" by the CWR, the editorial went on to attack the BBC's *Good Morning Scotland* Radio show, many of whose listeners had phoned in to express their disgust at the *Record's* coverage. "We will not be subjected to the political malcontents who look to Joseph Goebbels as a journalist's role model," the tabloid thundered.

These last remarks are truly disingenuous. Goebbels was chief propagandist for Hitler's fascist regime and one of the leading architects of the Nazi's racial extermination policies. If any one deserves such a comparison, it is the *Record* itself.

Daily Record is not alone. Last month, The Richard Littlejohn, a columnist in the *Sun*, Rupert Murdoch's daily tabloid, published a particularly vicious, racist novel entitled "To Hell in a Handcart". Littlejohn's tract celebrates the anti-liberal and populist prejudices of an imaginary ex-policeman, Mickey French, who kills a Romanian asylum seeker involved in a robbery on his home. At one point in the book, French's car is attacked. "He could see the faces pressed against the glass, foreign faces. There must have been 10 or a dozen, swarthy, olive-skinned young men with gold teeth in designer clothes, women in shawls and headscarves with babies in arms, thrusting their hands towards the car."

The racist prejudices and crude stereotyping in Littlejohn's first work of fiction can be read each week in his column in the *Sun* parading as fact.

The coverage briefly examined above gives only an indication of the toxic character of the anti-immigrant and chauvinist sentiments peddled each day by the tiny group of people who control and write for Britain's tabloid press. The latest figures show a circulation of 597,418 for the *Daily Record* and 3,518,681 for the *Sun*, making them Scotland and Britain's highest selling dailies respectively.

Just as instructive is that both the *Record* and *Sun* are keen supporters of Tony Blair's Labour government. Their editorial line is only a somewhat more vulgar exposition of the government's own anti-immigrant policies.

See Also:

British and Czech governments suspend racist anti-Roma airport checks
[17 August 2001]

Britain: Government plans forcible removal of 60,000 asylum seekers
[16 August 2001]



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